

Christopher J. Douglas - Full written testimony

Chairman Pfluger, ranking member Magaziner, and committee members thank you for this opportunity to testify before you today. My testimony is based on my experience as a combat veteran, my perspective on our efforts in Afghanistan, and my reaction to the US withdrawal and evacuation, which are sometimes confused as the same event but were actually two separate, distinct activities.

I have served our country as a Marine Infantry Officer for over 31 years in an active and reserve capacity. In 1995, I left active service, began a law enforcement career, and entered the Marine Corps Reserve. I assumed command of my first infantry company the month after 9.11.2001. Like many Americans, I wanted to serve my country and pursue those responsible for the attack. President Bush stated, "We will not waver; we will not tire; we will not falter; and we will not fail. Peace and freedom will prevail." The unprovoked attacks on America and these words remained my reason to serve. I have had the honor and privilege of leading Marines for five tours in combat operations since 9/11. I led Marines in combat operations in Iraq in 2003 and 2005 as a rifle company commander. I returned to Iraq, leading an advisor team from 2015 - 2016 that transitioned into a Task Force responsible for advising and assisting Iraqi Security Forces during Operation Inherent Resolve and the pivotal Ramadi Counterattack against ISIS. I also led two Advisor Teams in Helmand Province, Afghanistan, from 2013 - 2014 and again in 2018. My last assignment was as the Assistant Chief of Staff G-5, Strategy and Plans at Marine Corps Forces Central Command in Tampa, FL. While serving in this capacity, although I did not return to Afghanistan to participate in the evacuation, I facilitated evacuation planning efforts within the command. I traveled to Al Udeid Air Base, Qatar, to reinstate and lead the Marine Coordination Element responsible for processing and assisting more than 12,000 Afghan evacuees as they fled Afghanistan. Encountering Afghan families lucky enough to escape with only a backpack, leaving their homes, family members, and the lives they had worked to build.

Reflecting on the current state of Afghanistan, many US service members, some who have served multiple tours in Afghanistan, wonder if their efforts, service, and individual sacrifices were worth the costs. While this may be better decided by historians in the future, I can confidently say that for twenty years, the sacrifices of our service members and their families have made a difference in the lives of our fellow Americans and our counterparts. Working with our Afghan and coalition partners, we denied terrorists the ability to plan, coordinate, and execute attacks on our homeland from the ungoverned spaces in Afghanistan. We also brought hope, growth, and prosperity to many Afghan people.

The stability we provided for twenty years wasn't perfect – it was always tenuous – and unfortunately, it crumbled in a matter of days. But it contrasts dramatically with the previous and current state of Afghanistan under Taliban rule, as it harbors terrorists, remains rampantly corrupt, and dramatically reverses the rights of women and girls with medieval-style rules. For many service members, this is a recurring nightmare, and regrettably, for many Afghans, it is

their reality. The culminating event was the loss of 13 US Service members, more than 170 Afghan evacuees, and an untold number of physical and moral injuries. My participation rapidly turned from assistance with the evacuation to assignment as the lead Marine conducting the Abbey Gate investigation.

To put our exit in perspective, the Soviet Union occupied Afghanistan from 1979 - 1989. Before their withdrawal from Afghanistan, Soviet political and military leadership had undertaken strategic political, economic, and military measures to provide for the Afghan government's survival. Extreme weather conditions delayed the Soviet withdrawal, and the Mujahadeen granted an extension. Following the withdrawal, the Soviets maintained at least one infantry division and airborne units in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan as an emergency QRF in case of rapid deterioration of the situation in Afghanistan. Two to three months after the Soviet withdrawal, the situation significantly deteriorated in Kandahar, and the Mujahedin launched massive attacks on the city. At the Afghan government's request, one Soviet airborne battalion was deployed. Its participation in combat was enough to stabilize the situation, as the Mujahidin believed that the Soviets would return. Soviet military and economic assistance enabled the Afghan government to remain in power for more than three years. Once Soviet assistance ended, the strength of the Afghan government rapidly declined until the government fell in 1992.

This contrasted sharply with the US departure from Afghanistan in 2021. Many of us believed that the negotiated timeline would be delayed because the Taliban failed to honor or operate within the parameters of the conditions-based Doha agreement. As early as April, I and presumably many of our Afghan partners were in disbelief by the announcement of the withdrawal date. This reduced our U.S. force posture and "boots on the ground" to nearly zero, with immense pressure to keep that number extremely low while preparing for the high likelihood of a noncombatant evacuation under some of the most trying conditions in history.

I thought back to President Bush's quote: "We will not waver; we will not tire; we will not falter; and we will not fail. Peace and freedom will prevail." And yet, we had wavered, we had tired, we had faltered, and we had failed. Ultimately peace and freedom did not prevail.

The final days of our Afghan campaign were chaotic and came with extreme consequences. I remember why we fought there and I'd like to think that my brothers-and-sisters-in arms who fought there remember as well.

In the words of General Mattis, CENTCOM Commander in a paper published to the Joint Force in 2012:

"We fought to protect the values that grew from the enlightenment; we fought to give hope to those who have lived under desperate conditions and to safeguard newfound freedoms and new values based on human rights that must be matured and furthered;

Our fight aimed to ensure governments and their citizens are fully able to fulfill their social contracts, freely addressing social injustices, and responding swiftly to curb oppressive actors;

And finally, we fought knowing that the world prospers when we succeed in restoring human rights and protecting human dignity.”[1]

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member, thank you again for allowing me to speak this morning/afternoon. I look forward to your questions.

[1] Unpublished Paper, USCENTCOM, 2012.

**HEARING BEFORE
THE UNITED STATES HOUSE COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON COUNTERTERRORISM, LAW ENFORCEMENT, AND
INTELLIGENCE**

April 18, 2023

Testimony of Simone A. Ledeen
Former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Middle East

I. Introduction

Chairman Green, Ranking Member Thompson, Chairman Pfluger, Ranking Member Magaziner, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. My name is Simone Ledeen. I am currently a Senior Visiting Fellow at the Krach Institute for Tech Diplomacy, a bipartisan initiative affiliated with Purdue University, and Managing Director at Vantage ROI. I previously served as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense (DASD) for the Middle East. Prior to that I was Principal Director and Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary for Special Operations and Combating Terrorism, where I was responsible for defense policy on counterterrorism activities, as well as military information support operations, irregular warfare, direct action, sensitive special operations, and personnel recovery/hostage issues.

Like many others, after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, I felt moved to serve our country. A family friend was on American Airlines Flight 77, which was hijacked by al Qaida operatives and crashed into the Pentagon. I served in Iraq from 2003–2004, and then in Afghanistan in 2005. In Afghanistan, I served alongside the military in a non-combat role, deploying there for most of 2005 and again from 2009–2010 as the Senior Treasury Representative to NATO’s International Security Assistance Force. Both of my brothers served in the Marine Corps—one in Iraq and the other in Afghanistan.

II. Experience with the Withdrawal from Afghanistan

My experience with the 2021 withdrawal from Afghanistan unfolded from my own home when I began receiving real-time requests for assistance from people on the ground in Afghanistan. The stories of chaos that I was hearing did not align with the picture that the U.S. government was trying to publicly paint about the withdrawal.

On August 19, 2021, a dear friend contacted me. She was looking to help an Afghan family trapped outside the Kabul airport. The father had served as an interpreter with our Special Forces. He was outside the airport at the northwest gate with two kids and an injured, pregnant wife. Upon learning this, I immediately reached out to people in my network who I thought might know what to do. I was invited to join a group chat that included active and retired military members and individuals with experience in the intelligence community. Without introduction, everyone in the chat started sharing information, which allowed us to piece bits of information together that we individually received to form a more robust picture of the reality on the ground, and help vetted, qualified people safely exit the country.

It was a spontaneous volunteer effort, the scope of which we did not initially comprehend. Our strategy from the outset was to find ways for at-risk individuals who had the appropriate documentation, and in some cases were known by members of our group, to gain entry with the assistance of U.S. service members who manned the gates and fences at the airport. This was challenging since there were thousands of people crowding the airport perimeter. We had group members who were communicating with teams on the ground. We also had (over time) telephone numbers for individual Marines. Once a service member made physical contact with an at-risk group and moved them inside, we focused on ensuring that they were manifested on a flight to a safe destination.

Over time we helped more and more people—American citizens, legal permanent residents, interpreters, intelligence assets, and some Afghan Commandos—leave. Yet, as the messages rolled in, I had to wonder—where was the U.S. government? The urgent, time-sensitive information we sent to the State Department did not receive a response. The U.S. government did not seem to have a full accounting of the number of people that needed to leave. How did we get to the point where volunteers in a group chat were offering more resources and support to evacuees than our own government?

More than ever, I believe the deaths of our 13 servicemembers, in addition to catastrophic injuries sustained by the dozens of young men and women at Abbey Gate, were avoidable and should never have happened. Our government's failure to secure the safety of our own citizens and those who risked their lives for us led to the most disgraceful and shameful national security crisis in our lifetime. To this date, nobody has been held accountable.

III. Observations About the Chaotic Withdrawal

Based on our group's involvement in the evacuation and related activities, I have some insights into the chaotic withdrawal that are likely shared by others who were involved in these efforts. Today, I'd like to give a few examples, which demonstrate that, after twenty years of fighting, everything quickly collapsed despite nearly fifteen years of withdrawal planning across three administrations. Fundamentally, the prior plans did not anticipate an arbitrarily imposed troop cap that negated our ability to make use of Bagram Air Base. This made previous plans obsolete, and it appeared our military planners had to start from scratch at the eleventh hour with impossible restrictions. This led to a number of issues:

- As we tried to help people flee, we could not identify who was running the airport. We were contacted by many groups, including civilian volunteers, NGOs, universities, and corporate entities who had planes either on the ground or enroute to assist in evacuating people. However, these planes could not get in contact with anyone from the U.S. or any government on the airfield, nor could their passengers access the gate. For example, one group was trying to reach a Ukrainian plane that had been sitting on the tarmac for several days. The group reported that the plane was for the Ukrainian Special Operations Forces (SOF), who had been waiting at the gate, but the soldiers said that nobody would let them in, even though they were manifested on the plane. This was the first of many times we would hear of groups that were manifested on flights not being able to access the airport. Until the final days, many chartered planes that were able to land in Kabul left nearly empty because the people who needed to leave on them could not get inside

the airport. Outside the airport gates, the area was not secured for Americans waiting to enter and the U.S. failed to create an organized process to identify individuals who should have been permitted entry. For example, members of our group organized night operations for American citizens to climb ladders to leap over airport fences. To further complicate the situation, the U.S.'s abandonment of Bagram Air Base meant that there was no air traffic control in place other than for military planes.

- On August 17, the U.S. government instructed American citizens in Afghanistan to shelter in place and not attempt to access the airport.¹ With this instruction, the U.S. government was telling its own citizens to hide. In the group chat, we recognized that this was because the Taliban—the force that the United States had been fighting for 20 years—controlled entry to the city and to the airport itself. The Taliban had started targeting those waiting to enter the airport, beating people, and burning their documents, which they needed to depart the country. So when the State Department stated that the airport was secure, we knew this was wrong.² If the airport was safe, why did the U.S. government tell American citizens to hide?
- The Taliban quickly took back control and began exercising their power. Videos circulated in our chat showed the Taliban firing weapons outside of the airport. Wounded civilians could be seen lying on the ground and covered in blood. These videos were filmed by the people we were attempting to help escape. At one point, we were alerted that there was an American family with a sign that said, “we are all here.” They were stranded outside Abbey Gate. Our teammates rallied cars to pick them up, but the family got spooked by the Taliban and went back to their residence. An image of the Taliban’s Iwo Jima reenactment with them kitted up in American gear also surfaced, which enraged us.³
- The State Department also instructed at-risk Americans to go to the Ministry of Interior Headquarters in Kabul on August 21. Later, the Taliban seized 20 of these U.S. citizens’ passports and held their owners hostage, though these Americans were eventually recovered.⁴ The following night, the State Department scheduled another pickup at the Ministry of Interior, with U.S. military personnel ready to meet and escort the Americans to the Kabul Airport. These efforts continued for several days, but required U.S. citizens and their families to clear a Taliban checkpoint where they were harassed and sometimes beaten, contrary to the terms agreed to by our government. There were no repercussions for this violation and humiliation of our citizens. Further, U.S. citizens’ spouses and minor children were permitted to depart via this method, but not their extended family. Our citizens were forced to decide whether to leave and effectively abandon parents and

¹ Adam Shaw, *State Dept tells Americans in Afghanistan to 'shelter in place' until they hear from embassy*, FOX NEWS (Aug. 17, 2021), <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/state-dept-americans-afghanistan-shelter-in-place>.

² Ned Price, *State Dep't. Press Briefing*, U.S. DEP'T OF STATE (Aug. 17, 2021), <https://www.state.gov/briefings/department-press-briefing-august-17-2021/>.

³ Jon Simkins, *Taliban photo appears to mock Iwo Jima flag raising in latest propaganda push*, MARINE CORPS TIMES (Aug. 21, 2021), <https://www.marinecorpstimes.com/off-duty/military-culture/2021/08/21/taliban-photo-appears-to-mock-iwo-jima-flag-raising-in-latest-propaganda-push/>.

⁴ Hollie McKay, *Taliban seizing Afghan-American's US passports outside Kabul airport*, N.Y. POST (Aug. 20, 2021), <https://nypost.com/2021/08/20/taliban-seizing-afghan-americans-us-passports-outside-airport/>.

adult children or stay and face the new Taliban way of life. In addition, we know of multiple legal permanent residents who should have been evacuated, but were turned away by the Taliban because they did not possess the blue U.S. passport.

- On August 23, as our team faced immense challenges assisting U.S. citizens and high-risk Afghans who needed to gain access to the airport, we continued to press forward. For every one group that made it through, it seemed like ten did not. Among those we were helping that day was an Afghan woman who had worked with U.S. intelligence on a clandestine platform. With the assistance of a Marine who ran across the airport to find her, she and her family waded through a canal of human waste to get inside the airport and are safe today, far away from Afghanistan. We shared photos of “our” families as they boarded flights.
- On August 24, U.S. officials on the ground announced they would no longer accept Afghan locals and issued a final call for American citizens to report to the airport. We learned later that a deal was made with the Taliban to expedite withdrawal by August 31st. The White House claimed they had contacted all American citizens, but many Americans we were trying to help had never heard from anyone from our government. As the State Department screened individuals at the airport, they began turning away some Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) recipients and high-risk Afghans. Once they were sent back outside the airport, they faced certain death.
- On August 25, the team managed to rescue 25 interpreters and former contract employees of a U.S. intelligence agency, including a double amputee who walked to Kabul with his family. That day, our group also supported the evacuation of high-risk Afghans who had assisted the FBI and the U.S. Treasury Department. We received reports from several American citizens and high-risk Afghans who struggled to reach the airport due to Taliban checkpoints, as well as conflicting information from the U.S. government. Some families, including U.S. citizens, were beaten by the Taliban while attempting to enter the airport. That evening, 11 buses filled with American citizens and high-risk Afghans could not gain entry to the airport, and an urgent security alert advised U.S. citizens to avoid the airport gates.⁵ Despite multiple efforts to contact relevant authorities, American citizens were left stranded outside the closed gates, with some eventually gaining access only after intervention from higher-level officials. Many of the high-risk Afghans were denied entry, and to my knowledge never made it out.
- With imminent threats reported at multiple gates, a suicide bomber attacked Abbey Gate, resulting in 13 Americans killed and dozens grievously wounded.⁶ Over a hundred Afghans were murdered, including the young son of one of the interpreters we had been trying to assist. As gates were being sealed shut, requests for help continued to pour in for 300 orphans and other large convoys, including music school students, and religious and ethnic minorities who had all been left stranded after the blast. Although we were

⁵ *Security Alert*, U.S. Embassy Kabul (Aug. 25, 2021), <https://af.usembassy.gov/security-alert-embassy-kabul-afghanistan-august-25-2021/>.

⁶ Matthieu Aikins, et al., *Suicide Bombers in Kabul Kill Dozens, Including 13 U.S. Troops*, N.Y. TIMES (Aug. 26, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/26/world/asia/kabul-airport-bombing.html>.

distraught and angry, our team of volunteers continued working to find alternative ways to evacuate people.

- Cleared data-science professionals within our group created and refined a tool we used to deconflict manifests and track who was leaving and where they went. As days passed, they met with leaders at U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) who were so impressed with this tool that they integrated it into their own efforts. By the evacuation's conclusion, we had tracked 7,000 evacuees through our own efforts—including 1,600 American citizens and 3,000 SIVs—and over 41,000 in partnership with SOCOM. While these figures certainly do not cover everyone who left, including on flights organized by other countries, our data suggest that the Administration's estimate of the number of evacuees who departed via the airport—124,000—is likely inaccurate and overstates the total number of evacuees.⁷
- There are many examples of quiet but Herculean effort in those final days—Afghans left behind who were still working to properly dispose of some of the most sensitive data that remained with our Afghan contractors. Many databases with millions of records nearly got left behind, but for the incredible risks by a few noble warriors who saved both themselves and the data they smuggled out.
- Intelligence tools had been removed too quickly and too completely from Afghanistan. Following the catastrophic deaths of the 13 service members during the withdrawal, U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) executed a strike based on bad intelligence that resulted in civilian deaths. Chairman Mark Milley defended the strike, calling it “righteous.”⁸ But CENTCOM had pulled all of its intelligence collection tools out of Afghanistan already and incredibly said they were relying on the Taliban—a force we had been fighting for 20 years—for force protection.
- Even basic essentials like food and water were forgotten. The situation outside the airport grew so desperate that inbound aircraft were asked to bring food and water into the country.
- It was only after the Taliban had captured Kabul and Americans were taken hostage that President Biden finally addressed the situation.⁹

IV. Resurgence of Terrorism

The Taliban wasted no time in asserting its power, and retribution was swift. The Talibs placed a high price on our Afghan partners' heads. Through various means, they quickly identified who

⁷ *U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan* at 5, THE WHITE HOUSE (Apr. 6, 2023), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/US-Withdrawal-from-Afghanistan.pdf>.

⁸ Alex Horton, et al., *Botched drone strike that killed 10 civilians in Kabul was not a result of criminal negligence, Pentagon says*, WASH. POST (Nov. 3, 2021), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2021/11/03/kabul-drone-strike-inspector-general-report/>.

⁹ Remarks by President Biden on the End of the War in Afghanistan, THE WHITE HOUSE (Aug. 31, 2021), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/08/31/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-end-of-the-war-in-afghanistan/>.

had been working with U.S. and hunted those individuals down—going house to house to find them.¹⁰ On our watch, they became the most well-armed terrorist group the world has ever seen. I speak on behalf of many when I say we cannot forget our Afghan allies who did not make it out of Afghanistan during the withdrawal. They live in constant fear that the Taliban will harm them or their families. Some have escaped to Pakistan, Iran, and other countries, and have been recruited by their militaries and intelligence agencies. They have been forced to teach our tactics and methods to our enemies. Some may even be fighting for the Russians in Ukraine.¹¹

To give you a sense for who is leading the Taliban today, four of the five ex-Guantanamo Bay detainees exchanged for Bowe Bergdahl in 2014 have senior positions in the Taliban's resurrected Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.¹² The Minister of Interior is Sirajuddin Haqqani, who is very close with al Qaida.¹³ Haqqani has planned multiple operations that have resulted in the deaths of American soldiers and civilians. He is wanted by the U.S. and there is a \$10 million bounty on his head.

ISIS-Khorasan has also regained immense strength. Prior to the withdrawal, the U.S. had crushed ISIS-Khorasan and imprisoned its few surviving members in the Pol-e-Charkhi prison. After the collapse of the Afghan government, in one of their first acts, the Taliban released those terrorist prisoners.¹⁴ I'm not the only one ringing the alarm bell on the reemergence of the threat ISIS-Khorasan once again poses. CENTCOM Commander General Michael Kurilla recently testified that ISIS-Khorasan would be able to launch attacks against western interests outside of Afghanistan in less than six months with little to no warning.¹⁵ Yet, our political leaders have remained silent, seemingly ignoring the resurgence of ISIS-Khorasan and our inability to combat this threat now that we have abandoned our allies and have no persistent intelligence collection capabilities there or in neighboring countries since the withdrawal. Afghanistan has become an ISIS-Khorasan playground. Apparently, we have not learned the lesson that what happens in Afghanistan does not stay in Afghanistan.

While the withdrawal has turned Afghanistan back into a terrorist breeding ground, arguably on track to exceed its pre-September 11 status, we must be mindful of terrorists who have already entered our country. In fiscal year 2022, 98 people on our terrorist watch list crossed over our

¹⁰ Tyler O'Neil and Teny Sahakian, *Taliban commit 'house-to-house executions' in Kabul after US exit as chilling audio demonstrates Afghans' fear*, FOX NEWS (Aug. 31, 2021), <https://www.foxnews.com/world/taliban-kabul-executions-afghanistan-gunshots-audio>.

¹¹ Zheela Noori and Najib Ahmadyar, *Former US-Trained Afghan Commandos Recruited by Russia, Iran*, VOICE OF AM. (Nov. 7, 2022), <https://www.voanews.com/a/former-us-trained-afghan-commandos-recruited-by-russia-iran-/6821028.html>.

¹² Samuel Chamberlain, *Four Taliban members swapped for Bowe Bergdahl now in Afghan government*, N.Y. POST (Sept. 7, 2021), <https://nypost.com/2021/09/07/four-taliban-members-swapped-for-bowe-bergdahl-now-in-afghan-government/>.

¹³ Peter Bergen, *He's on the FBI's most-wanted list and is now a key member of the Taliban's new government*, CNN (Sept. 9, 2021), <https://www.cnn.com/2021/09/09/opinions/haqqani-taliban-government-afghanistan-bergen/index.html>.

¹⁴ Kelly Laco, *Pentagon says 'thousands' of ISIS-K prisoners released by Taliban*, FOX NEWS (Aug. 27, 2021), <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/pentagon-thousands-isis-prisoners-released-taliban>.

¹⁵ See Gen. Michael "Erik" Kurilla, *Statement for the Record Before the Senate Armed Services Committee on the Posture of US Central Command* at 3, 10 (Mar. 13, 2023), <https://af.usembassy.gov/security-alert-u-s-embassy-kabul-afghanistan-august-28-2021/>.

southern border that we know of.¹⁶ With unprecedented overland immigration, many individuals have been entering the country on foot and avoiding detection. This is a concerning development. In the initial airlifts out of Kabul, U.S. government officials did not properly vet all the Afghans who were evacuated. A Department of Defense whistleblower has alleged that 324 individuals evacuated from Afghanistan were allowed to enter the U.S. despite appearing on the Defense Department's Biometrically Enabled Watchlist (BEWL).¹⁷ This, while thousands of vetted Afghans remained trapped and unable to evacuate. Indeed, there are many videos circulating online and elsewhere of torture and murder of our Afghan allies since August 2021. In addition to these horrific and violent acts, this situation has caused deep and continuing moral injury to our veterans and civilians who served.

V. Accountability and Recommendations

Our warfighters voluntarily went into harm's way to keep our country safe. Many are alive today because of individual Afghans who sacrificed for them. Today, our institutional leaders act as if the war and our withdrawal didn't happen, and we are just meant to move on. Many veterans cannot move on without accountability. We must hold those responsible for the failed Afghanistan withdrawal accountable for their decisions. While the withdrawal (and timing) was fundamentally a policy decision made by the Commander in Chief, military leaders and senior government officials across multiple administrations' departments and agencies need to tell our nation the truth about what led to the chaos, rather than continue to rely on career-preserving talking points.

Moreover, when the U.S. government supported the Afghan civilian leadership, the civilian leaders not only enriched themselves but they also funded the Taliban through bribes, contracts with front companies and subcontractors and ransom payments.¹⁸ With few exceptions, the U.S. government looked the other way. We knew this for a decade and although changes were made to vetting contractors and subcontractors, this situation continued. For a long time, politicians and military leaders also issued glowing statements about the progress the Afghan National Security Forces were making, which were at odds with the intelligence assessments produced at the same time. It is not too late for the long-needed reckoning to make sure this never happens again.

Many veterans and civilians who have served have gotten involved in resettlement to help address the moral injury they have sustained. Our government can help with this:

1. The government should consider establishing a mechanism for direct verification of SIVs that worked under classified contracts. Over two years have passed and this is still not in place. The government should create a mechanism for DoD to communicate directly with the State Department to verify Afghan employment under classified contracts. The

¹⁶ Anna Giaritelli, *Nearly 100 FBI terror watchlist suspects nabbed at southern border*, WASH. EXAMINER (Oct. 25, 2022), <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/policy/defense-national-security/nearly-100-fbi-terror-watch-list-suspects-caught-southern-border>.

¹⁷ Alayna Treene, *Scoop: Pentagon watchdog to open review into Afghanistan whistleblower claims*, AXIOS (Sep. 8, 2022), <https://www.axios.com/2022/09/08/defense-department-inspector-general-afghanistan-withdrawal>.

¹⁸ U.S. Special Inspector Gen. for Afg. Reconstruction, *Corruption in Conflict: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, SIGAR 16-58-LL (Sept. 2016), <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-16-58-LL.pdf>

entire system for employment verification (the entire basis for visa approval) is left to civilian contractors, many of whom dissolved in the lead-up to August 2021 and no longer exist. The Department of Defense has not been held accountable for the local nationals contracted under their employment who continue to bounce between safe houses if they have not fled to third countries.

2. Consider authorizing SIV eligibility for Afghans who were injured while serving the USG before their one year of service eligibility. Currently, the Afghan Allies Protection Act is rigid in the time of service required to be eligible for an SIV.¹⁹ The result is that an Afghan could have dutifully served for 340 days and have been traumatically injured in combat alongside his American compatriots, but he is ineligible for an SIV because he is a month short of the requirement.
3. We must take care of our veterans. The withdrawal was an emotional time for many of our veterans, who careened back and forth between grief and rage. To many, it has seemed like America does not care about the sacrifices they made on their behalf. The ballooning mental health crisis among the veteran population speaks to this devastation. This chaotic withdrawal has significantly added to our military's current recruitment problem. Some veterans I know, all of whom come from military families, have stopped encouraging or are even preventing family members from signing up. Many veterans have been involved in the resettlement process with Afghans to help address the moral injury the veterans have sustained. Our government has the resources to help with this process and should not wait to assist.
4. Before too much more time passes, there must be an official effort to document the actions of these volunteer groups—specifically, in order to capture successes and what was accomplished with limited resources in a very short period of time. This should include the data architecture created. We could use this as a model of how to design a holistic system on the fly and inside of a dynamic, asymmetric threat environment in a constrained time frame.
5. In the event of a future overseas conflict, the U.S. government could maintain a central database of SIV eligible employees. There could be a requirement for the employing office to upload information verifying employment at the time an employee becomes eligible for SIV.

With these new policies and processes in place, we can reassure our allies, support our veterans, ensure that troops on the ground will be able to receive the support they need from local communities in the future, and—most importantly—avoid another catastrophic withdrawal in the future. Thank you for the opportunity to be here today and I look forward to your questions.

¹⁹ See Afghan Allies Protection Act of 2009, Pub. L. No. 111-8, § 602(b)(2)(A)(ii), 123 Stat. 524, 807 (2009).

**The Homeland Security Costs of the Biden Administration's
Catastrophic Withdrawal from Afghanistan**

**U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Homeland Security
Subcommittee on Counterterrorism, Law Enforcement, and Intelligence**

April 18, 2023

Testimony of Ambassador Nathan A. Sales

Chairman Pfluger, Ranking Member Magaziner, and Members of the Subcommittee, it is a pleasure to be here today to discuss this important topic.

My name is Nathan Sales. I am the founder and principal of Fillmore Global Strategies LLC, a consultancy that provides legal and strategic advisory services on matters at the intersection of law, policy, and diplomacy. I am also a nonresident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council, a member of the advisory board at the Vandenberg Coalition, and a senior advisor at the Soufan Group.

From 2017 to 2021, I served at the U.S. Department of State as the Ambassador-at-Large and Coordinator for Counterterrorism. Concurrently, I was the Under Secretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights (acting) as well as the Special Presidential Envoy to the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS. I previously served at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security as Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy, and at the U.S. Department of Justice as Senior Counsel in the Office of Legal Policy, where I worked on counterterrorism policy.

I am here as a private citizen, but my testimony is informed by my experiences working on national security and counterterrorism for the U.S. government over the course of two decades. Today I will describe the increasingly grave terrorist threats emanating from Afghanistan after the administration's withdrawal from the country in August 2021. I will then discuss the difficulties the United States faces collecting intelligence in post-withdrawal Afghanistan and degrading the terrorist groups that now are able to operate more or less freely in the country. Finally, I will focus on some of the harmful consequences for our homeland security resulting from the withdrawal.

I.

The terrorist threat environment in Afghanistan has deteriorated dramatically since August 2021 – and it is getting worse. Due to a combination of Taliban-provided safe haven, the Taliban's lack of counterterrorism capability, and the absence of sustained counterterrorism pressure from the United States, Afghanistan has become hospitable terrain for a variety of terrorist groups. As of today, the threat seems to be relatively contained within and around the country's borders, but that will not be true for long. According to CENTCOM commander General Michael "Erik" Kurilla, the local ISIS affiliate – ISIS Khorasan Province, or ISIS-K – could carry out "an external

operation against U.S. or Western interests abroad in under six months with little to no warning.”¹ When terrorists have sanctuary, as they now do in Afghanistan, they are able to plot and execute attacks abroad. The longer they enjoy safe haven, the greater the risk they will be able to strike far beyond their borders, eventually including their ultimate goal of hitting the U.S. homeland. We learned this lesson the hard way on September 11, 2001.

While Taliban-controlled Afghanistan is a permissive environment for terrorists in general, two groups are of particular concern: al Qaeda and ISIS-K.

The Taliban and al Qaeda have been allies for more than a quarter century, and al Qaeda is now reconstituting itself in its historic safe haven. Enjoying Taliban sanctuary at the turn of the century, al Qaeda was able to plot and execute a deadly series of attacks against the United States, including the August 1998 attacks on our embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, the bombing of the USS *Cole* in October 2000, and, of course, the 9/11 attacks. While decades of U.S. counterterrorism pressure decimated core al Qaeda, the group is now rebuilding under the Taliban’s protection. Last year, the United Nations assessed that the Taliban “remains close” to al Qaeda, that the terrorist group “has a safe haven under the Taliban and increased freedom of action,” and that al Qaeda sees Taliban-controlled Afghanistan as a “friendly environment” to raise money, recruit, and train.² Al Qaeda has never abandoned its goal of striking the “far enemy” – i.e., committing attacks inside the United States.

The continued partnership between the Taliban and al Qaeda is perhaps best seen in the fact that, after the U.S. withdrawal, al Qaeda leader Ayman al Zawahiri resurfaced in Afghanistan, living in a safe house associated with the Haqqani Network, a Taliban faction that maintains close ties to al Qaeda and is itself a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization. The safe house was located in the Shirpur district in the heart of Kabul, a prosperous neighborhood that is controlled by the Haqqanis and is just down the street from the former U.S. embassy.³ The administration deserves credit for eliminating Zawahiri in a July 2022 drone strike. But this episode may be best understood as a tactical victory amid a broader strategic defeat. The key takeaway is that the Taliban felt emboldened to welcome al Qaeda’s leader back to Kabul, and al Qaeda’s leader felt it was safe enough there to accept the offer.

ISIS-K likely represents an even graver threat at present, though for different reasons. While the Taliban considers ISIS-K an enemy, Afghanistan’s new rulers lack the wherewithal to meaningfully degrade the group. One of the most formidable ISIS branches, ISIS-K controls

¹ Quoted in Alexander Ward et al., *Inside the GOP Foreign Policy War*, Politico, Mar. 16, 2023, <https://www.politico.com/newsletters/national-security-daily/2023/03/16/inside-the-gop-foreign-policy-war-00087374>. General Kurilla assessed that it would be “much harder” for ISIS-K to attack the U.S. homeland in that timeframe. *Id.*

² United Nations, *Thirteenth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2611 (2021) Concerning the Taliban and Other Associated Individuals and Entities Constituting a Threat to the Peace, Stability, and Security of Afghanistan* at 3, 12 (May 26, 2022), <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N22/333/77/PDF/N2233377.pdf?OpenElement>.

³ Shane Harris, *Zawahiri Appeared on His Balcony. The CIA Was Ready to Kill Him.*, Wash. Post, Aug. 2, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/08/02/zawahiri-drone-operation-kabul/>.

territory in eastern Afghanistan and, like al Qaeda, aspires to carry out attacks across the region, in Europe, and ultimately in the United States.

In the 20 months since the Taliban took power, ISIS-K has conducted a bloody campaign of bombings and other attacks across Afghanistan and even into neighboring Pakistan, seemingly at will. While firm numbers are hard to come by, it is estimated that, since August 2021, ISIS-K has committed nearly 400 attacks in Afghanistan and Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa region, with approximately 330 in the former and around 70 in the latter. These numbers include the 379 attacks claimed by ISIS-K in its magazine al-Naba, plus an estimated 20 additional unclaimed attacks, including bombings of mosques and schools, assassinations, etc. Casualty counts are more difficult to assess but, since August 2021, could be in the range of more than 1,800 killed and many more injured.⁴

For instance, in September 2022, ISIS-K likely was responsible for a suicide bombing at an educational center in Kabul that killed 52 and injured dozens more, mostly young women and teenage girls who were there to take a practice college entrance exam.⁵ (The Taliban subsequently banned women and girls from universities, having previously banned them from high schools and middle schools.) A month earlier, on August 7, 2022, a likely ISIS-K attack in Kabul killed 120 people celebrating the Shia holiday of Ashura.⁶ ISIS-K has also killed Americans. An ISIS-K suicide bomber carried out the August 26, 2021, attack at Hamid Karzai International Airport, killing 13 U.S. service members and some 170 Afghan civilians who were desperately trying to escape Taliban misrule. In the days prior, Taliban fighters had released the bomber from detention at Bagram Air Base,⁷ along with as many as 5,000 other suspected terrorists.⁸

Many of ISIS-K's attacks have targeted Afghanistan's Hazara minority, a predominantly Shia community in a largely Sunni nation, in an apparent effort to inflame sectarian tensions. Beyond the intolerable bloodshed and risk of further instability in Afghanistan, ISIS-K's campaign raises the possibility that the Iranian regime might use the attacks as a pretext to intervene in the country, purportedly for the benefit of its Shia co-religionists.⁹ Similar interventions by the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism have left a trail of death and destruction stretching from Lebanon to Syria to Iraq to Yemen and beyond.

⁴ Data collected by the Islamabad, Pakistan-based research platform "The Khorasan Diary" in April 2023.

⁵ Fazel Rahman Faizi, *Death Toll in Last Week's Kabul School Blast Climbs to 52*, AP, Oct. 3, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/islamic-state-group-afghanistan-religion-taliban-suicide-bombings-5a50c846bbb6bf6f2bfa5e64d72d67c0>.

⁶ Weronika Strzyżyńska, *Hundreds of Hazaras Killed by ISKP Since Taliban Took Power, Say Rights Group*, The Guardian, Sept. 6, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/sep/06/hundreds-of-hazaras-shia-killed-iskp-islamic-state-khorasan-province-taliban-power-human-rights-watch>.

⁷ Eric Schmitt & Helene Cooper, *Lone ISIS Bomber Carried Out Attack at Kabul Airport, Pentagon Says*, N.Y. Times, Feb. 4, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/04/us/politics/kabul-airport-attack-report.html>.

⁸ Oren Liebermann & Natasha Bertrand, *ISIS-K Suicide Bomber Who Carried out Deadly Kabul Airport Attack Had Been Released from Prison Days Earlier*, CNN, Oct. 6, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/10/06/politics/kabul-airport-attacker-prison/index.html>.

⁹ See, e.g., Colin P. Clarke & Ariane M. Tabatabai, *What Iran Wants in Afghanistan*, Foreign Affairs, July 8, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2020-07-08/what-iran-wants-afghanistan>.

There is also a significant risk that state-of-the-art American military equipment could fall into terrorists' hands. According to the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, in its haste to leave Afghanistan by the White House's August 31, 2021 deadline, the military left behind nearly **\$7.2 billion** worth of vehicles, weapons, and other gear. That includes:

- Over 40,000 Humvees, armored combat vehicles, and other ground vehicles worth **\$4.13 billion**;
- At least 78 aircraft worth **\$923.3 million**;
- Over 300,000 machine guns, rifles, and other small arms valued at **\$511.8 million**;
- More than 1.5 million rounds of specialty munitions valued at **\$48 million**; and
- Night-vision goggles, biometric identification systems, and other specialized equipment worth some **\$200 million**.¹⁰

Terrorists in Afghanistan and beyond could well gain access to this equipment. Nor would it be surprising if these arms end up being sold on the black market to drug cartels, mercenaries like Russia's Wagner group, or hostile foreign governments.

These threats are compounded by the fact that Afghanistan no longer has professional counterterrorism forces able to protect its population. The Taliban is not capable of doing so, and the Afghan security services that the United States helped build over the years did not survive the withdrawal. During my time at the State Department, the Counterterrorism Bureau invested significant resources in training and equipping elite police units to respond to terrorist attacks in real time, and collect evidence for use in criminal trials or for intelligence purposes. You may recall the diabolical ISIS-K attack on a maternity ward in Kabul in May 2020, during which 24 people were gunned down in cold blood, including mothers and newborn babies. It was one of our units that responded to that incident, neutralizing the attackers and saving countless lives.¹¹ After August 2021, these units ceased to exist.

II.

Just as the threat environment in Afghanistan is growing more dire, the United States finds itself severely constrained in collecting intelligence about terrorists in the country and taking meaningful action against them. Our ability to monitor terrorist threats in Afghanistan has been significantly degraded by the withdrawal, and we are no longer able to conduct a sustained kinetic campaign against groups active there.

To dismantle a terrorist organization, or prevent a defeated one from rebuilding, all levels of the group must be subjected to a campaign of low intensity but persistent military force. One-off drone strikes are not enough. What's needed is a sustained effort to eliminate the group's leadership and infrastructure, its training camps, its foot soldiers, and so on. (To be sure, kinetic

¹⁰ Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Why the Afghan Security Forces Collapsed* at 65, 66 (Feb. 2023), <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/evaluations/SIGAR-23-16-IP.pdf>.

¹¹ Nathan A. Sales, *Counterterrorism in the Trump Administration and Beyond*, Jan. 14, 2001, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/counterterrorism-in-the-trump-administration-and-beyond/index.html>.

action alone cannot enduringly defeat a terrorist group. It must be accompanied by civilian-sector efforts including economic sanctions, criminal prosecutions, border security tools, and counter-radicalization programs, among others. Military force is necessary but not sufficient.) Such a kinetic campaign in turn depends on capabilities and resources that include drones and other strike assets to carry out operations against targets; local partner forces that U.S. operators can work by, with, and through; and exquisite intelligence collection capabilities. Effective counterterrorism operations do not, however, necessarily require extensive American ground forces. The U.S. dismantled ISIS in Iraq and Syria by supporting local partner forces with a relatively modest number of operators on the ground and overwhelming air power. We used a similar strategy to rout al Qaeda in Afghanistan in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 before shifting to a more ambitious mission in the country and the heavier military footprint that came with it.

When it comes to intelligence, counterterrorism operations typically rely on a combination of signals intelligence (SIGINT) to eavesdrop on terrorist communications; robust human intelligence (HUMINT) operations to penetrate terrorist networks; extensive use of ISR platforms (“intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance” or, more colloquially, drones); and other sources and methods. These capabilities allow the U.S. to uncover plots, identify targets, and develop a “pattern of life” that enables the precise use of force to remove targets from the battlefield while reducing the risk of inadvertent harm to civilians to the greatest extent possible.

The United States has lost a great deal of counterterrorism capability in Afghanistan, and a so-called “over-the-horizon” strategy – under which strike assets that are based hundreds of miles away fly occasional sorties into Afghanistan – is a poor substitute. Simply put, it is not possible to systematically degrade a terrorist group from over the horizon.

Counterterrorism strikes depend on intelligence and, with no military or diplomatic presence on the ground in Afghanistan, it is far more difficult to monitor terrorist groups as they rebuild, train, and plot. And with U.S. drones now required to fly many hours round trip from and to their bases in distant countries, leaving precious little time to loiter on station, it is far more difficult to eliminate terrorists even when they can be located. The killing of Ayman al Zawahiri was a great success, but it is the exception that proves the rule. To date, the Zawahiri operation remains the lone acknowledged counterterrorism strike in Afghanistan since August 2021. One drone strike in 20 months is not a viable counterterrorism strategy. No wonder some members of the national security community, believing over-the-horizon to be a fantasy, have taken to disparaging it as “over-the-rainbow.”¹²

The limits of over-the-horizon counterterrorism may be best illustrated by the fact that, nearly two years after the Kabul airport bombing, its perpetrators remain essentially at large. The day of the attack, President Biden promised the attackers “[w]e will not forgive. We will not forget. We will hunt you down and make you pay.”¹³ Twenty months later, the administration has yet to

¹² Jonathan Swan & Zachary Basu, *Red Flags for Biden’s “Over-the-Horizon” Strategy*, Axios, Sept. 12, 2021, <https://www.axios.com/2021/09/12/afghanistan-counterterrorism-over-horizon-biden>.

¹³ Kevin Liptak, *Biden to Kabul Attackers: “We Will Hunt You Down and Make You Pay”*, CNN, Aug. 26, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/08/26/politics/biden-kabul-attack/index.html>.

make good on the president's threat, and part of the reason it has failed to do so is because it lacks the capability to do so. America's fallen warriors and the families they left behind deserve better.

III.

The harms from the administration's withdrawal from Afghanistan will not be limited to that unfortunate country. It will have profound consequences for the security of our homeland as well. With the United States no longer able to count on robust intelligence flows from Afghanistan, our traveler vetting and border security systems will be less effective at identifying possible threats. What happens in Afghanistan does not stay in Afghanistan.

In the years after 9/11, the United States built a number of sophisticated systems to identify suspected terrorists and other potential threats attempting to enter the country. For example, federal agencies use a variety of watchlists – such as a database of known or suspected terrorists (KSTs) and the no-fly list – to screen airline passengers, inbound international travelers, visa applicants, and others to assess whether they could be terrorists or otherwise pose a threat to our national security. The United States has signed dozens of agreements under Homeland Security Presidential Directive 6, or HSPD-6, to share terrorist watchlist information with foreign partners. U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and the State Department collect biometrics such as fingerprints from foreigners entering the United States and applying for visas, respectively, and check them against databases of terrorists, criminals, and other threats. And CBP uses its Automated Targeting System to analyze airline reservation data and other information to screen international travelers entering the country.

These and other systems have proven extraordinarily effective at preventing another 9/11-scale attack on the homeland. But they are only as powerful as the data that is fed into them. For years, the United States has been able to count on extensive data flows from Afghanistan about terror suspects – captured enemy material and “pocket litter” such as thumb drives and mobile phones seized by U.S. special operations forces in counterterrorism raids, biometric data and other identifying information collected and shared by the Afghan government, and so on. But now, without a meaningful presence on the ground to enable unilateral collection and lacking a government partner able and willing to gather and share information with us, our vetting systems have lost some of the data that made them so effective.

This comes at an inauspicious time for our border security. We have seen historic numbers of migrant encounters on our southern border in recent years,¹⁴ and terrorists could easily take advantage of this vulnerability. CBP has reported a dramatic spike in the number of individuals on its Terrorist Screening Dataset watchlist who were apprehended after crossing the southern border: zero in fiscal year 2019, three in fiscal year 2020, 15 in fiscal year 2021, 98 in fiscal year 2022, and 69 so far in fiscal year 2023.¹⁵ And those are just the ones we know about. Furthermore,

¹⁴ U.S. Customs and Border Protection, *Southwest Land Border Encounters*, Mar. 10, 2023, <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/southwest-land-border-encounters>.

¹⁵ U.S. Customs and Border Protection, *CBP Enforcement Statistics Fiscal Year 2023*, Mar. 10, 2023, <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/cbp-enforcement-statistics>. The Terrorist Screening Dataset “is the U.S. government’s database that contains sensitive information on terrorist identities.” It “originated as the consolidated terrorist watchlist to house information on known or suspected terrorists (KSTs) but has evolved over the last decade

terrorist organizations have long sought to exploit vulnerabilities in our southern border to carry out attacks inside the United States. In 2011, the Iranian regime attempted to use a Mexican drug cartel to assassinate the Saudi ambassador to the United States by bombing a restaurant in Georgetown.¹⁶ In late 2021, Tehran planned to use a Mexican national with ties to drug cartels to assassinate former national security advisor John Bolton.¹⁷ I am not aware that al Qaeda, ISIS-K, or other terrorists in Afghanistan similarly are currently plotting to attack the homeland by way of the southern border. But if Afghanistan-based terrorists do seek to conduct attacks inside our country in the future, it is safe to assume they will be aware of our border vulnerabilities.

* * *

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member, members of the Subcommittee, thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you today. I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.

to include additional individuals who represent a potential threat to the United States, including known affiliates of watchlisted individuals.” *Id.*

¹⁶ Charlie Savage & Scott Shane, *Iranians Accused of a Plot to Kill Saudis’ U.S. Envoy*, N.Y. Times, Oct. 11, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/12/us/us-accuses-iranians-of-plotting-to-kill-saudi-envoy.html>.

¹⁷ Nick Schiffrin, *Iranian Man Charged for Trying to Assassinate Former National Security Adviser John Bolton*, PBS, Aug. 10, 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/iranian-man-charged-for-trying-to-assassinate-former-national-security-adviser-john-bolton>.

Dr. Jonathan Schroden¹

CNA

Impacts of the Withdrawal from Afghanistan on Terrorist Threats to the United States

Before the Committee on Homeland Security

Subcommittee on Counterterrorism, Law Enforcement, and Intelligence

United States House of Representatives

April 18, 2023

On February 29, 2020, then secretary of state Mike Pompeo signed what has come to be known as the “Doha Agreement” between the United States and the Taliban.² In that agreement, the administration of President Donald J. Trump agreed to withdraw all military forces from Afghanistan within about 14 months (May 2021). For its part, the Taliban agreed to “not allow any of its members, other individuals or groups, including al-Qa’ida, to use the soil of Afghanistan to threaten the security of the United States and its allies.”³

After candidate Joe Biden won the 2020 presidential election, President Trump ordered a drawdown of US forces in Afghanistan to 2,500 troops and 11 bases.⁴ President Biden inherited this force structure upon his inauguration in January 2021. After several months of deliberation, on April 14, President Biden announced his intent to complete the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan,⁵ and he eventually set a deadline of August 31, 2021.⁶ On August 15, after several months of severe battlefield losses by Afghanistan’s security forces, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani fled the country, and the Taliban captured Kabul. Over the remaining days in August, the US military surged troops into Afghanistan to secure the Hamid Karzai International Airport. Those troops, along with our coalition partners and US government civilians, then evacuated over 100,000 individuals from the airport in the largest airlift ever conducted by the United States.⁷

In the rest of this testimony, I will focus on the following topics, at the request of the subcommittee:

- The nature of the Doha Agreement secured under the Trump Administration as well as the Biden Administration’s decision to see the agreement through
- Why withdrawals are among the most difficult military operations to undertake

¹ The views expressed in this testimony are the author’s alone and should not be interpreted as representing those of CNA or any of the sponsors of its research. CNA is an independent nonprofit research and analysis organization dedicated to the safety and security of the nation. CNA’s publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors.

² “Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan Between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan Which Is Not Recognized by the United States as a State and Is Known as the Taliban and the United States of America,” US Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf>.

³ Ibid, p. III.

⁴ “Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan,” US Department of Defense, Dec. 2020, pp. 5-6.

⁵ “Remarks by President Biden on the Way Forward in Afghanistan,” The White House, Apr. 14, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/04/14/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-way-forward-in-afghanistan>.

⁶ The initial date set for the withdrawal was September 11, 2021. This date was revised after criticism emerged of its symbolism.

⁷ “US Withdrawal from Afghanistan,” The White House, Apr. 6, 2023, p. 9, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/US-Withdrawal-from-Afghanistan.pdf>.

- The extent to which Al-Qaeda (AQ) and the Islamic State – Khorasan Province (ISKP) retain the intent and capability to conduct attacks against the US homeland from Afghanistan
- The extent to which the Taliban have upheld their commitment to address terrorist threats in Afghanistan
- Impacts of the drawdown of US counterterrorism (CT) presence and resources dedicated to Afghanistan

The following sections will address these topics in turn and will be followed by a brief conclusion.

The Doha Agreement and the Decision to Withdraw

As the US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, began negotiations with the Taliban at the direction of President Trump, he stated publicly that “nothing is agreed until everything is agreed.”⁸ In this case, “everything” meant four main items: (1) the withdrawal of all US forces from Afghanistan, (2) a Taliban guarantee to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a safe haven for international terrorist attacks, (3) a framework for negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban on the future governing structure of the country, and (4) a comprehensive ceasefire. The final agreement signed by the US and the Taliban in 2020 addressed the first two points in detail. However, it stated that the third point would be addressed after the signing of the deal and the fourth point would “be an item on the agenda of the intra-Afghan dialogue and negotiations.”⁹ Over the ensuing year, the Taliban engaged in direct talks with representatives of the Afghan government. Those discussions, however, accomplished very little. Additionally, even though the two sides engaged in several limited ceasefires (e.g., around the Eid holiday), a comprehensive ceasefire was never obtained.

By the time the US withdrawal began, the security situation in Afghanistan had deteriorated markedly since the US completed the removal of President Barack Obama’s surge forces in 2014. At that time, the US had adopted a limited role of advising Afghanistan’s security forces and conducting partnered CT operations. One (imperfect but still useful¹⁰) metric demonstrating the decline in the security situation is the change in how many administrative districts the Afghan government controlled. In 2017, it was assessed to control 217 of the country’s 407 districts, but this number fell to just 129 districts in 2021 (a decrease of 40 percent).¹¹ By my own assessment, when the US withdrawal began, the Taliban had effectively surrounded at least 15 of the country’s 34 provincial capitals.¹² Contrary to the arguments of some former senior US government officials, the situation President Biden confronted upon entry to the White House was not one of a stable stalemate that afforded an effective “insurance policy” against terrorism from Afghanistan;¹³ rather, it was a war on the downslope.

⁸ Siyar Sirat, “Nothing Is Agreed Until Everything Is Agreed: Khalilzad,” *TOLO News*, Jan. 29, 2019, <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/khalilzad-says-%E2%80%98nothing-agreed-%E2%80%99-qatar>.

⁹ “Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan Between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan Which Is Not Recognized by the United States as a State and Is Known as the Taliban and the United States of America,” p. I.

¹⁰ Jonathan Schroden, “The Challenges of Mapping Taliban Control in Afghanistan,” *Lawfare*, Aug. 1, 2021, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/challenges-mapping-taliban-control-afghanistan>.

¹¹ Bill Roggio, “Mapping Taliban Control in Afghanistan,” *FDD’s Long War Journal*, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/mapping-taliban-control-in-afghanistan>.

¹² Jonathan Schroden, “Lessons from the Collapse of Afghanistan’s Security Forces,” *CTC Sentinel* 14, no. 8 (Oct. 2021), <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/lessons-from-the-collapse-of-afghanistans-security-forces>.

¹³ Mark F. Bernstein, “Q&A: Former Ambassador Ryan Crocker *85 on Afghanistan,” *Princeton Alumni Weekly*, Oct. 1, 2021, <https://paw.princeton.edu/article/qa-former-ambassador-ryan-crocker-85-afghanistan>.

Thus, Biden effectively had two options in early 2021: complete the withdrawal of US forces that Trump had begun in accordance with the Doha Agreement or abrogate that agreement and surge US forces in what would have been the third consecutive presidential attempt to jumpstart a turnaround in the war. Faced with those choices, Biden chose to withdraw, stating: “I’m now the fourth United States President to preside over American troop presence in Afghanistan: two Republicans, two Democrats. I will not pass this responsibility on to a fifth.”¹⁴

Why Withdrawals Are Difficult

When President Biden announced the full withdrawal from Afghanistan, he said it would begin on May 1, 2021, and be complete by the end of August. Just before Biden’s announcement, military logistics expert Ryan Baker and I examined why several months would be necessary to withdraw the 2,500 troops from the country. We found that while the US military had the logistical capacity to remove that many people from Afghanistan in a shorter timeframe, doing so would have required “pulling transportation and logistical resources away from other missions around the world, abandoning a bunch of perfectly good equipment in Afghanistan, signing expensive contracts for quick-turn transportation capacity, leaving allied and partner forces in Afghanistan twisting in the wind, and potentially increasing the risk to US troops on the ground during the withdrawal.”¹⁵

One of the most difficult types of military operation is a retrograde under fire. Even withdrawing under the *threat* of fire greatly increases the difficulty of moving military personnel and materiel.¹⁶ In Afghanistan, while the US and the Taliban had reportedly agreed not to attack each other as the withdrawal proceeded,¹⁷ the degree of trust between the two sides was not high. US forces in Afghanistan therefore had to assume that the withdrawal could turn violent at any time. Additional factors further complicated the withdrawal: the land-locked and highly mountainous nature of Afghanistan, the array of coalition forces that the US was supporting there, legal complexities surrounding the disposal or retrograde of US military equipment, and the absence of a staging area in a neighboring country.¹⁸

Those complexities notwithstanding, the US military concluded that the best way to meet Biden’s intent of a “safe and orderly” withdrawal¹⁹ was to conduct it as rapidly as possible, in keeping with the notion that the longer one takes to complete a withdrawal under the threat of fire, the longer one is exposed to the high degree of risk associated with such an operation. To minimize risk to US servicemembers during the withdrawal, the US military therefore responded to Biden’s order with alacrity. By June 8, 2021, just over a month after the withdrawal began, US Central Command (CENTCOM) reported that the drawdown was half complete. Three weeks later, it reported 90 percent completion (see Figure 1).

¹⁴ “Remarks by President Biden on the Way Forward in Afghanistan.”

¹⁵ Ryan Baker and Jonathan Schroden, “Why Is It So Tough to Withdraw from Afghanistan?” War on the Rocks, Apr. 8, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/04/why-is-it-so-tough-to-withdraw-from-afghanistan>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Kimberly Dozier, “Secret Annexes, Backroom Deals: Can Zalmay Khalilzad Deliver Afghan Peace for Trump?” *TIME*, Feb. 15, 2020, <https://time.com/5784103/secret-annexes-backroom-deals-can-zalmay-khalilzad-deliver-afghan-peace-for-trump>.

¹⁸ Baker and Schroden, “Why Is It So Tough to Withdraw from Afghanistan?”

¹⁹ Anne Gearan, “Biden Signals Short Delay in Withdrawal of Forces from Afghanistan,” *Washington Post*, Mar. 25, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/biden-signals-short-delay-in-withdrawal-of-forces-from-afghanistan/2021/03/25/2a37dbc2-8d9e-11eb-9423-04079921c915_story.html.

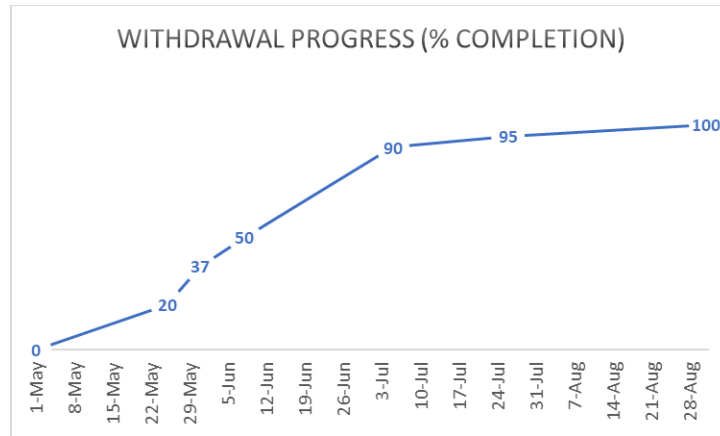


Figure 1: Reported progress of the US military withdrawal from Afghanistan (April–August 2021)²⁰

As the US withdrew, Afghanistan’s security forces overused its air force and special operations forces to compensate for the loss of US and coalition capabilities. The Afghan Air Force (AAF), for example, roughly tripled the number of sorties it flew in June and the Afghan Commandos’ operational tempo increased by 30 percent. These activity levels were unsustainable in the absence of contracted maintainers and logisticians who left along with the US military forces that had been protecting them. By the end of June, the AAF’s readiness rates had plummeted to 39 percent (from 77 percent in May), and the Commandos had suffered substantial casualties.²¹ As Afghanistan’s military rapidly depleted the few capabilities that provided overmatch of the Taliban, more and more districts fell, with the largest acceleration of Taliban capture occurring between mid-June and mid-July (see Figure 2).

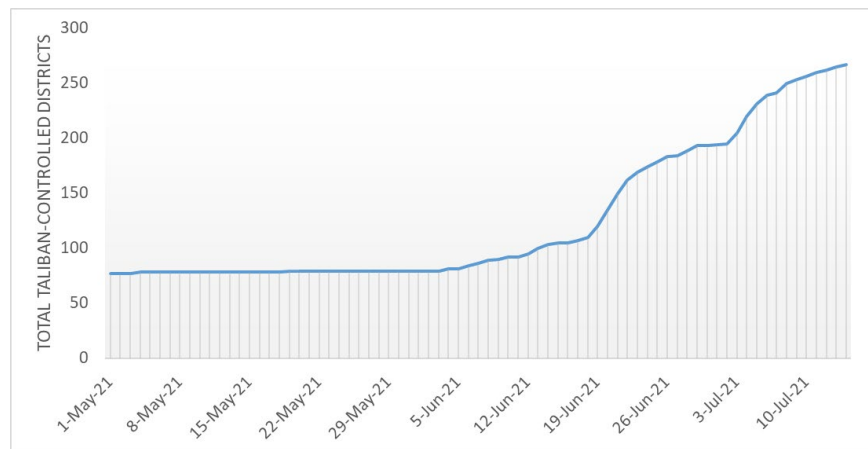


Figure 2: Total number of Taliban-controlled districts in Afghanistan (May–July 2021)²²

²⁰ Compiled from updates issued by US Central Command on the progress of the withdrawal. See: <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/2640121/update-on-withdrawal-of-us-forces-from-afghanistan-may-31-2021>; <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2632456/afghanistan-retrograde-nearly-one-quarter-complete>; <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/2649542/update-on-withdrawal-of-us-forces-from-afghanistan-june-7-2021>; <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/2682484/update-on-withdrawal-of-us-forces-from-afghanistan-july-5-2021>; <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/2708638/update-on-the-withdrawal-of-us-forces-from-afghanistan-july-26-2021>.

²¹ Jonathan Schroden, “Lessons from the Collapse of Afghanistan’s Security Forces,” *CTC Sentinel* 14, no. 8 (Oct. 2021), <https://ctc westpoint.edu/lessons-from-the-collapse-of-afghanistans-security-forces>.

²² Adapted from Schroden, “Lessons from the Collapse of Afghanistan’s Security Forces.”

AQ and ISKP Intent and Capabilities

There is no question that both AQ and the Islamic State retain the intent to attack the US homeland. The more pressing question is whether they have the capabilities to do so. Within Afghanistan, the United Nations (UN) assessed in 2022 that AQ maintained a few hundred fighters, but these individuals were mostly involved with local Taliban units. The only notable AQ leader reported to be in Afghanistan after the United States' killing of Ayman al-Zawahiri on July 31, 2022, is Abu Ikhlas al-Masri.²³ The UN has assessed that "it is unlikely that Al-Qaida and its affiliates will seek to mount direct attacks outside Afghanistan for the near term owing to a lack of capability and restraint on the part of the Taliban, as well as an unwillingness to jeopardize their recent gains,"²⁴ though some analysts have argued that the potential for future AQ threats is greater than it currently appears.²⁵

With roughly 1,000 to 3,000 fighters,²⁶ ISKP is now about half the strength of its zenith in 2017.²⁷ The group maintains sizable cells in Afghanistan's eastern Kunar, Nangarhar, and Nuristan provinces, as well as in Kabul. The UN recently assessed that smaller ISKP elements exist in the northern and northeastern provinces of Badakhshan, Faryab, Jowzjan, Kunduz, Takhar, and Balkh.²⁸ Since the Taliban's conquest of the country, ISKP has sought to undermine the Taliban government as a guarantor of security by attacking Taliban forces and political leaders,²⁹ foreign embassies and hotels housing foreigners,³⁰ and religious and ethnic minority groups.³¹ ISKP has also sought to undermine the Taliban's legitimacy as a

²³ Al-Masri is an AQ operational commander who had been captured by US forces in 2010 and was reportedly freed by the Taliban in 2021. Asfandiyar Mir, "Twenty Years After 9/11: The Terror Threat from Afghanistan Post the Taliban Takeover," *CTC Sentinel* 14, no. 7 (Sept. 2021), <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/twenty-years-after-9-11-the-terror-threat-from-afghanistan-post-the-taliban-takeover>.

²⁴ "Letter Dated 11 July 2022 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee Pursuant to Resolutions 1267 (1999), 1989 (2011) and 2253 (2015) Concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and Associated Individuals, Groups, Undertakings and Entities Addressed to the President of the Security Council," UN Security Council, July 15, 2022, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N22/394/29/PDF/N2239429.pdf?OpenElement>. The UN reaffirmed this assessment in its most recent report: "Letter Dated 13 February 2023 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee Pursuant to Resolutions 1267 (1999), 1989 (2011) and 2253 (2015) Concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and Associated Individuals, Groups, Undertakings and Entities Addressed to the President of the Security Council," UN Security Council, Feb. 13, 2023, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N23/038/91/PDF/N2303891.pdf?OpenElement>.

²⁵ Mir, "Twenty Years After 9/11" and Sara Harmouch, "Al-Qaeda's Looming Threat: Are We Looking Over the Wrong Horizon?" *Lawfare*, Apr. 4, 2023, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/al-qaedas-looming-threat-are-we-looking-over-wrong-horizon>.

²⁶ "Letter Dated 13 February 2023 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee."

²⁷ Amira Jadoon, Abdul Sayed, and Andrew Mines, "The Islamic State Threat in Taliban Afghanistan: The Resurgence of the Islamic State Khorasan," *CTC Sentinel*, Jan. 2022, <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-islamic-state-threat-in-taliban-afghanistan-tracing-the-resurgence-of-islamic-state-khorasan>.

²⁸ "Letter Dated 13 February 2023 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee."

²⁹ Andrew Mines and Amira Jadoon, "A String of Assassinations in Afghanistan Points to ISIS Resurgence with US Officials Warning of Possible Attacks on American Interests," *Military.com*, Mar. 21, 2023, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/opinions/2023/03/21/string-of-assassinations-afghanistan-points-isis-resurgence-us-officials-warning-of-possible-attacks.html>.

³⁰ "Deadly Attack on Kabul Hotel Popular with Chinese Nationals," *Al-Jazeera*, Dec. 12, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/12/12/deadly-attack-on-kabul-hotel-popular-with-chinese-nationals>, and Mohammad Yunus Yawar, "Two Russian Embassy Staff Dead, Four Others Killed in Suicide Bomb Blast in Kabul," *Reuters*, Sept. 5, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/afghan-police-report-suicide-bomb-blast-near-russian-embassy-kabul-2022-09-05>.

³¹ Ewelina U. Ochab, "Yet Another Attack on the Hazara in Afghanistan," *Forbes*, Oct. 1, 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ewelinaochab/2022/10/01/yet-another-attack-on-the-hazara-in-afghanistan/?sh=3a93ec452fa6>.

religious movement—and to bolster its own recruiting and fundraising efforts—by increasing the quality, quantity, and number of languages of its online propaganda.³²

CENTCOM's General Michael "Erik" Kurilla, in his recent congressional testimony, stated that ISKP could conduct attacks against American interests outside Afghanistan in less than six months, "with little to no warning." When pressed on his assessment, however, he conceded that an attack within the region or Europe was more likely.³³ Indeed, ISKP has demonstrated its ability to conduct attacks throughout much of Afghanistan, against Uzbekistan and Tajikistan,³⁴ and inside Pakistan.³⁵

The Taliban's Commitment

In the Doha Agreement, the Taliban pledged to not allow terrorist groups "to use the soil of Afghanistan to threaten the security of the United States and its allies."³⁶ As with much of the Doha Agreement, the language in this clause is imprecise—for example, the meaning of "threaten the security of" is not clear. The vagueness of this and similar clauses clouds the ability of analysts to determine whether the Taliban are meeting their commitment.

The United States' identification—and subsequent targeted killing—of AQ leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in downtown Kabul demonstrates this disconnect. From a US perspective, the fact that al-Zawahiri was present in the capital—and reportedly staying in a house belonging to an aide of the Taliban's acting interior minister Sirajuddin Haqqani³⁷—violated this clause, since al-Zawahiri had continued to issue invectives online threatening the United States. From the Taliban's perspective, however, al-Zawahiri had not conducted or directed any external operations against the United States since the signing of the Doha Agreement, and his mere presence in Kabul did not violate the agreement. More concretely, the Taliban generally do not see AQ's presence in Afghanistan as a problem to be solved, and some senior members of the Taliban—beyond Haqqani—maintain close ties with AQ fighters.³⁸

The Taliban have, however, consistently pursued and targeted ISKP—which they view as the primary militant threat to their domination of Afghanistan—since their ascension to power. These operations were initially broad in aim and "brutally ineffective,"³⁹ but they have become refined and targeted over time. Most recently, the Taliban have engaged in a surge of apparently targeted raids against ISKP cells across the country.⁴⁰ The efficacy of these raids has been difficult to assess thus far, though a delay in

³² "Letter Dated 13 February 2023 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee."

³³ Svetlana Shkolnikova, "ISIS in Afghanistan Capable of Foreign Attacks in 6 Months, CENTCOM Commander Says," *Stars and Stripes*, Mar. 16, 2023, <https://www.stripes.com/theaters/us/2023-03-16/centcom-kurilla-isis-afghanistan-attacks-9514063.html>.

³⁴ Sudha Ramachandran, "ISKP Attacks in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, Aug. 31, 2022, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13731-iskp-attacks-in-uzbekistan-and-tajikistan.html>.

³⁵ Ismail Khan and Salman Masood, "ISIS Claims Bombing of Pakistani Mosque, Killing Dozens," *New York Times*, Mar. 4, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/04/world/middleeast/pakistan-peshawar-mosque-explosion.html>.

³⁶ "Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan."

³⁷ Jonathan Schroden, "What Zawahiri's Death Tells Us About Afghanistan's Future," *Politico*, Aug. 2, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2022/08/02/zawahiris-death-and-afghanistans-future-00049239>.

³⁸ Mir, "Twenty Years After 9/11."

³⁹ Colin Clarke and Jonathan Schroden, "Brutally Ineffective: How the Taliban Are Failing in Their New Role as Counter-Insurgents," *War on the Rocks*, Nov. 29, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/11/brutally-ineffective-how-the-taliban-are-failing-in-their-new-role-as-counter-insurgents>.

⁴⁰ See, for example: Tweet by "Afghan Analyst," Apr. 8, 2023, <https://twitter.com/AfghanAnalyst2/status/1644910476067831809?s=20>.

ISKP's media productions may suggest the Taliban are achieving some degree of success.⁴¹ Thus, in the case of ISKP, the Taliban are conducting operations that appear to be generally aligned with their commitments in the Doha Agreement, though the primary motivation behind these operations is likely a desire to crush any militant opposition in the country, rather than to demonstrate adherence to the agreement with the US.⁴²

Impacts of the US Drawdown on Counterterrorism

The Biden Administration recently released a white paper on the withdrawal that claims the “decision to leave Afghanistan freed up critical military, intelligence, and other resources to counter terrorist threats around the world, including in Syria, Iraq, Somalia, and Yemen.”⁴³ The reality, however, is that in the wake of the 2018 National Defense Strategy⁴⁴ and then-Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis' declaration that “terrorism is no longer the top priority” of the Department of Defense (DOD),⁴⁵ the US has been drawing down its CT capabilities across the globe. Rather than reinvesting capabilities that were tied up in Afghanistan to pursue increasing threats of terrorism more vigorously in places like West Africa, the US has steadily shifted its focus toward strategic competition and preparation for high-end conflict with China. As part of that shift, the US has been relying more on partners and proxies in what leaders of the US special operations enterprise recently described as a “partner-led, US-enabled” approach.⁴⁶ This global drawdown of CT capability, which began in DOD, is now cascading across the rest of the US government—a trend that CT practitioners are increasingly concerned about.⁴⁷

Specific to Afghanistan, the US withdrawal has left it reliant on an “over-the-horizon” (OTH) approach to CT, which primarily consists of flying drones from air bases in the Middle East, through Pakistani airspace, and over areas of interest in Afghanistan.⁴⁸ As national security analyst Seth Jones recently described, “It takes [an MQ-9A] Reaper roughly 14 hours to fly round-trip from Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar to Afghanistan, giving it only 12 to 15 hours to collect intelligence and strike targets if necessary.”⁴⁹ The inefficiency of this approach, combined with the absence of any US presence or intelligence partners on the ground in Afghanistan, has dramatically reduced the ability of US intelligence agencies to track terrorist threats there. General Frank McKenzie, the former head of

⁴¹ Tweet by Abdul Sayed, Apr. 11, 2023, <https://twitter.com/abdsayed/status/1645840194510127115?s=20>.

⁴² For excellent overviews of the Taliban's political calculus, see: Andrew Watkins, “The Taliban One Year On,” *CTC Sentinel* 15:8 (August 2022), <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-taliban-one-year-on> and Andrew Watkins, “What's Next for the Taliban's Leadership Amid Rising Dissent?” US Institute for Peace, April 11, 2023, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/04/whats-next-talibans-leadership-amid-rising-dissent>.

⁴³ “US Withdrawal from Afghanistan,” p. 11.

⁴⁴ “Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America,” US Department of Defense, 2018, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

⁴⁵ David Martin, “Terrorism No Longer the Military's Top Priority, Mattis Says,” CBS News, Jan. 19, 2018, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/terrorism-no-longer-the-militarys-top-priority-mattis-says>.

⁴⁶ “Statement for the Record, the Honorable Christopher P. Maier, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict and General Bryan P. Fenton, USA Commander, United States Special Operations Command Before the Committee on Armed Services Subcommittee on Intelligence & Special Operations United States House of Representatives,” Mar. 9, 2023, [https://armedservices.house.gov/sites/republicans.armedservices.house.gov/files/2023%20SOLIC-USSOCOM%20Posture%20-%20Maier-Fenton%20-%20Statement%20\(FINAL\).pdf](https://armedservices.house.gov/sites/republicans.armedservices.house.gov/files/2023%20SOLIC-USSOCOM%20Posture%20-%20Maier-Fenton%20-%20Statement%20(FINAL).pdf).

⁴⁷ Author's conversations with CT practitioners in February and March 2023.

⁴⁸ Jonathan Schroden, “New Ideas for Over-the-Horizon Counterterrorism in Afghanistan,” *Lawfare*, May 8, 2022, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/new-ideas-over-horizon-counterterrorism-afghanistan>.

⁴⁹ Seth Jones, “Countering a Resurgent Terrorist Threat in Afghanistan” Council on Foreign Relations, Apr. 14, 2022, https://www.cfr.org/report/countering-resurgent-terrorist-threat-afghanistan?utm_source=studies&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=New%20Campaign&utm_term=Seth%20Jones%20CPMU%20Sailthru%20Distro%20List.

CENTCOM, commented in the wake of the withdrawal, “We’re probably at about 1 or 2% of the capabilities we once had to look into Afghanistan.”⁵⁰ Although the US has likely improved its ability since then through experience with the new OTH approach, the current commander of CENTCOM, General Kurilla, recently testified that he believed “we can see the broad contours of an attack, [but] sometimes we lack the granularity to see the full picture.”⁵¹

Conclusion

There is no question that the US withdrawal from Afghanistan did not go as planned or as hoped. The negotiations between the US and the Taliban were supposed to continue until “everything is agreed,”⁵² but they concluded well before that point. Secretary Pompeo ultimately signed an agreement that fell far short of initial expectations and left the Afghan government in an even more precarious position than it was in previously.⁵³ In addition, the Trump Administration’s lack of detailed planning for the withdrawal⁵⁴ and reported efforts to obstruct the Biden transition team from beginning such work⁵⁵ left President Biden’s administration in an unenviable position as he entered office.

Nonetheless, once President Biden decided to complete the withdrawal and fulfill the terms of the US agreement with the Taliban, the US military recognized that a rapid withdrawal was necessary to minimize the risk associated with a retrograde under threat of violence. Within two months of the withdrawal’s commencement, it was 90 percent complete.⁵⁶ That pace—designed to prioritize the protection of US servicemembers—was far too rapid for Afghanistan’s security forces to absorb. As had been noted by independent entities for years prior to the withdrawal, Afghan security forces were critically dependent on US or contracted support for nearly all of their enabling functions.⁵⁷ With that support removed, numerous analysts predicted that their ability to defend the country against the Taliban onslaught would spiral downward. My own assessment of Taliban and Afghan security force capabilities, published in January 2021, concluded that after the US withdrawal, “the Taliban would have a slight military advantage [over Afghan security forces]...which would then likely grow in a compounding fashion.”⁵⁸

⁵⁰ Robert Burns and Lolita C. Baldor, “US Commander: Al-Qaida Numbers in Afghanistan Up ‘Slightly,’” AP News, Dec. 10, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-middle-east-united-states-taliban-islamic-state-group-bec82acfe6dbd19bed4c11db21d7a78e>.

⁵¹ Jeff Seldin, “US General: Islamic State Afghan Affiliate Closer to Attacking Western Targets,” Voice of America, Mar. 16, 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/us-general-islamic-state-afghan-affiliate-closer-to-attacking-western-targets/7008633.html>.

⁵² Sirat, “Nothing Is Agreed Until Everything Is Agreed: Khalilzad.”

⁵³ Schroden, “Lessons from the Collapse of Afghanistan’s Security Forces.”

⁵⁴ “US Withdrawal from Afghanistan,” p. 2.

⁵⁵ Lara Seligman and Bryan Bender, “‘Really Quite Shocking’: Inside the Ugly Transition at the Pentagon,” Politico, Jan. 20, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/01/20/biden-pentagon-transition-460768>.

⁵⁶ “Update on Withdrawal of US Forces from Afghanistan July 5, 2021,” CENTCOM, July 6, 2021, <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/2682484/update-on-withdrawal-of-us-forces-from-afghanistan-july-5-2021>.

⁵⁷ Jonathan Schroden, “Afghanistan Will Be the Trump Administration’s First Foreign Policy Crisis,” War on the Rocks, Dec. 5, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/12/afghanistan-will-be-the-trump-administrations-first-foreign-policy-crisis>; Jonathan Schroden, “Afghanistan Will Be the Biden Administration’s First Foreign Policy Crisis,” Lawfare, Dec. 20, 2020, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/afghanistan-will-be-biden-administrations-first-foreign-policy-crisis>. See also SIGAR’s quarterly reports to Congress from 2016 to 2021.

⁵⁸ Jonathan Schroden, “Afghanistan’s Security Forces Versus the Taliban: A Net Assessment,” *CTC Sentinel* 14, no. 1 (Jan. 2021), <https://ctc westpoint.edu/afghanistans-security-forces-versus-the-taliban-a-net-assessment/>.

On August 6, the first of Afghanistan's provincial capitals fell, and President Ghani abandoned Kabul nine days later. The resulting chaos in the capital substantially escalated the difficulty of the last leg of the withdrawal. In addition to heartbreaking scenes of Afghan civilians crowding in squalid conditions around the airport seeking an exit from the country and stories of Taliban brutality against them,⁵⁹ 13 US servicemembers and around 170 Afghans were killed in an ISKP attack at the airport's Abbey Gate.⁶⁰ Another 10 Afghan civilians lost their lives in an errant US drone strike in the wake of that ISKP attack.⁶¹

In the year and a half since the withdrawal, AQ has remained a problem for the United States in Afghanistan. The group has relative safety under the Taliban government to exist and operate, though it currently has minimal capability to conduct attacks beyond the country. The inverse is true of ISKP. It has substantially more capability in Afghanistan than AQ but is viewed by the Taliban as the primary challenger to their consolidation of control over the entirety of the country. The Taliban have thus conducted numerous operations and targeted raids against ISKP since the withdrawal.

For its part, the US has accelerated its pivot away from CT (toward strategic competition with China) and established an OTH CT capability aimed at AQ and ISKP in Afghanistan. This capability is limited in its scope and what it can detect, though it was clearly sufficient to identify the presence of al-Zawahiri in Kabul. Recommendations by national security analysts to improve the United States' ability to detect and disrupt terrorist threats in Afghanistan have included establishing new intelligence networks in the country, negotiating basing access in a neighboring country or establishing a sea base off the coast of Pakistan to reduce drone transit times, investing in longer duration drone platforms (such as the MQ-9B SkyGuardian), increasing cyber and open-source collection efforts,⁶² and potentially engaging in clandestine cooperation (e.g., intelligence sharing) with the Taliban against our shared enemy, ISKP.⁶³

Looking ahead, the Taliban's strong relationship with AQ in Afghanistan portends a consistent (albeit nascent) threat from AQ to the US for some time. Whether the Taliban will prevent AQ from using Afghanistan as a launchpad for external attacks in accordance with the Doha Agreement remains to be seen, but the discovery of al-Zawahiri in Kabul is not an encouraging omen. The Taliban are likely to continue operations against ISKP that may become more effective; however, the size, scope, locations, and resilience of ISKP auger against the group's elimination any time soon. The US will thus need to maintain—and possibly expand—its OTH approaches to CT in Afghanistan for years to come. Congress would therefore be wise to demand long-term strategies for doing so and to invest in OTH CT capabilities commensurate with operational timelines of a decade or more.

⁵⁹ Ali M. Latifi, "Chaos and Violence as Crowds Keep Growing Outside Kabul Airport," *Al-Jazeera*, Aug. 23, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/23/afghanistan-talibanchaos-and-violence-as-crowds-keep-growing-outside-kabul-airport>.

⁶⁰ Jim Garamone, "US Central Command Releases Report on August Abbey Gate Attack," DOD, Feb. 4, 2022, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2924398/us-central-command-releases-report-on-august-abbey-gate-attack>.

⁶¹ Azmat Khan, "Military Investigation Reveals How the US Botched a Drone Strike in Kabul," *New York Times*, Jan. 6, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/06/us/politics/drone-civilian-deaths-afghanistan.html>.

⁶² Jones, "Countering a Resurgent Terrorist Threat in Afghanistan" and Schroden, "New Ideas for Over-the-Horizon Counterterrorism in Afghanistan."

⁶³ Jonathan Schroden and Alexander Powell, "Working with the Devil? The Potential for US-Taliban Cooperation Against the Islamic State in Afghanistan," *War on the Rocks*, Sept. 16, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/09/working-with-the-devil-the-potential-for-u-s-taliban-cooperation-against-the-islamic-state-in-afghanistan>.